

Gloves come off in Anwar-Najib face-off

Malaysiakini.com

May 1, 2011

COMMENT The two – Prime Minister Najib Razak and Pakatan's PM-presumptive Anwar Ibrahim - are now eyeball-to-eyeball and the Malaysian electorate is waiting to see who will blink first.

The metaphor is from the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 when the United States faced off with the Soviet Union over the latter's secretly placed missiles in its client state.

Crisis over, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk offered a wry comment that has since enjoyed cocktail party immortality: "We were eyeball-to-eyeball and the other side just blinked."

The stakes are not as perilous in the contest between BN and Pakatan Rakyat, but Rusk's eyeball-to-eyeball remark could serve as apt description for the current face-off between Najib and Anwar.

In some aspects, the political face-off in Malaysia is beginning to resemble the quadrennial presidential contest in the US between Republicans and Democrats.

The intense media gaze on the personalities of the leading contestants, the feeding frenzy that follows any hint of a sexual misdemeanor, and the regular commissioning of voter surveys by pollsters, point up the similarities between the two countries' politics.

Now that the contest in Malaysia has arrived at a singular focus on the rival coalitions' lead-contenders, the similarity to US-style presidential contests is gathering further pace, not to mention popular speculation about the role of Lady Macbeth-like wives in the background.

All it needs now is for televised debates between the lead contenders to take place for the parallels to be complete. (Some time before Anwar challenged Najib to such a debate but the latter sidestepped the invitation, turning to Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin as proxy.)

Sex, religion and head-to-head debates would make Najib versus Anwar in GE13 a replica of some of the US presidential contests of the last two decades, particularly the ones in which Bill Clinton was involved, in 1992 and 1996.

But in one crucial matter, the difference is so stark that it dwarfs the similarities: in the Malaysian contest, the prospect of a spell in prison looms for one lead contender; and defeat for the rival coalition could well mean that a murder investigation would be reopened with the prospects of collateral damage to a supporting cast of current luminaries.

All of which raises the stakes in the Malaysian contest to a level that helps explain, though not excuse, the frenzy over a sex video purportedly showing Anwar in a transaction with a sex worker.

The resulting spectacle contrives to be both riveting and revolting. Laments expressed for the depths to which Malaysian politics have fallen seem beside the point.

Staying above the fray

In these circumstances, it helps that one contestant at least, Anwar, tries to wring some laughs from it all. Indications are the crowds at his ongoing road show are lapping it up.

Anwar's quips to an overflow crowd in Ampang in Selangor last Friday combined subtle self-deprecation ("I must be Superman wearing my underwear on the outside") with satire aimed at his putative tormentors (he poked fun at Najib's wife Rosmah's foray into sex education for children).

It would be good if Anwar refrains from tit-for-tat responses by holding forth on the sexual and other proclivities of Umno types as he lurched into doing at the rally in Ampang.

This may win him spurious debating points but would lose him the moral high ground to which the crude tactics of his enemies have ceded him.

Holding himself somewhat above the fray would invite the sympathy of people already appalled at the extent to which his adversaries appear to be going to do him down.

Self-deprecating, rather than retaliatory, humour is a more puissant weapon in straits like this, particularly when compared to the crudities of an octogenarian adversary like Dr Mahathir Mohamad who took broad digs at Anwar's alleged homosexuality at a sparsely-attended Perkasa gathering in Alor Setar last Saturday.

One has lost the argument when one descends to the basement as response.

The gloves have come off in the face-off between the lead contestants in what seems the final turn before the tape is breasted in the 13th GE.

It would help if the Piped Piper of reform in what is regarded as Malaysian politics' defining battle to keep his sights trained on targets several notches higher than the nether regions to which his adversaries are presently fixated.

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